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Book Review: *Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions*

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(49) After a restatement of the usual rejoinders to the Orientalist critique, his own suggestion is “to develop and explicate *anekāntavāda* [the perspectivalist Jaina doctrine of ‘no one view’] to show how it can be used as a hermeneutic of suspicion of typically western standpoints and the epistemological and political commitments with which they are imbricated. This will pave the way for the future work of re-imagining South Asian religions.” (50) This he begins to do with insight and skill.

Overall, this is a wide-ranging and at times bracing examination of what one of the editors

calls “established viewpoints, many of which are the products of the presumed universality of non-Indic analytic categories and methods” in the study of South Asian religions (xxv) – and by means of a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. A full index is provided and the volume is almost completely free of spelling and grammatical errors.

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***Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions.* Edited by Tracy Pintchman and Corinne G. Dempsey. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015, xi + 221 pp.**

MY first experiences as a Lutheran entering the cathedrals of Cologne and Florence and much later temples in Tirupati and Chidambaram were transformative. The experience of material objects as radiant with the numinous (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) came rather late to me, and all the more powerful for that. *Sacred Matters* argues that the Enlightenment and Protestant origins of religious studies and the current near obsession with textualism as the chief academic approach to religion needs help: this slim volume wishes to direct more scholarly attention to physical *stuff of religion as practiced*: visuality, materiality, objects, images, clothing, dance, song, amulets, rags, and flags.

This relatively new focus, *interdisciplinary material cultural studies*, beginning in the 80s, has been applied to both Western and Eastern religions. Examples include Joanne Waghorne and Norman Cutler’s *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone*

(1985), Colleen McDannell’s *Material Christianity* (1998), Richard Davis’ *The Lives of Indian Images* (1999), and William Keenan’s *Materializing Religion* (2006). For those unfamiliar with the long list of contributions to the field, this book of essays could be a useful place to start. For those already schooled, *Sacred Matters* offers a charming selection of materials: the half-human, half-serpent, image of Patañjali in modern yoga studios, Jesus in full lotus, camphor production for Hindu *pūjā*, the glass eyes distinguishing sectarian Jain images, Goddess *śāligrāmā* stones in Michigan and Tamil Nadu, red threads and metal hands among Muslims in Andhra Pradesh, and Buddhist robes and bowls in Theravāda.

What can be learned by considering such a hodgepodge of odd objects? Edited volumes can suffer from lack of cohesion. Pintchman divides the volume into two sections: Chapters 1-5 focus

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on objects understood as divine embodiments, iconic or aniconic. Chapters 6-9 take up other types of materials used in religious practice. Pintchman distills three major themes from the wide array of artifacts and traditions: what “...religious objects *mean*, what they *do*, and what they *embody*.”(p.10). The theme of *meaning* largely explores the fascinating continuities and discontinuities over time and place of the same material. Meanings shift. The theme of *doing* probes how cultural artifacts shape human social relationships, in particular how they can be used to promote solidarity or conflict. Even more interesting for comparativists are the cultural *continuities* in the use of sacred materials in South Asia among the wide range of religious communities. These phenomena, it is suggested, may in practice establish a profound grassroots dialogue between traditions that a mere study of contrasting beliefs might miss. Herein lies the strength of the collection, and the study of stuff. The third theme, *embodiment*, underlines the importance of the biography of things--not a new topic for art historians. But the lessons of art history with respect to the complexity and multidimensionality of the creation, maintenance, destruction (and disposal) of art, can also be applied fruitfully to religious materials of all kinds. They have a life history which can be seen to clarify abstract issues in doctrine or myth or philosophy. The life of an object can also elucidate sociological questions of power, status, production, exchange, and consumption.

For those interested in South Asia, all the chapters entice—it’s a fun collection. Two particularly stand out for Hindu-Christian studies. The first, by Matthew Schmalz is entitled “North Indian Materialities of Jesus.” Schmalz reports on Indian response to different

Catholic images. Inculturated images such as ashram Jesus in the lotus posture and ochre robes, or Cosmic Jesus styled according to Bharatnatyam iconography seem to excite little devotion, whereas the plastic doll of the infant Jesus or Jesus as resurrected film-hero in 2-D cardboard succeed in their incarnational interactivity. Schmalz concludes, “Material religion quite simply “materializes” particular relationships; it forces the issue by making explicit what is often implicit.”(p. 86) Some materiality inspires intimacy and exchange, other presentations, *out of touch*, remain remote.

The second chapter of particular interest, by Selva Raj and Corinne Dempsey, is “Letting Holy Water and Coconuts Speak for Themselves.” Dempsey completes the volume by offering an overview of the work of Selva J. Raj on Tamil Catholicism, both clerical and lay. Raj, who originally was to co-edit and contribute a paper to the volume, passed on in 2008, but his legacy is well represented by the judicious selections Dempsey offers and contextualizes. We read, for example, Raj’s vivid description of a St. Anthony procession and prostration ritual. We also see clearly a number of important contrasts where religions and cultures meet, and exchange. The tug of war between the Western institution and the South Asian religious culture, between clerical elites and lay devotees, shows up in stark relief in material forms: saintly palanquins (or are they Hindu god chariots?) blessed with holy water, pilgrimage tonsure, candles and camphor, coconut water, chicken sacrifices, circumambulation and genuflection, and Jesus *bhajans* sung in Sanskrit flood the lived experience of Tamil lay Catholics. The Hindu-Christian *mélange* of artifacts and rituals serves to identify Indian Catholics with their ancient non-Christian heritage and close neighbors,

while asserting also their distinctive Catholic identity-- “covering all the bases.” Together, Dempsey summarizes, they “...produce a ritual blending across religious boundaries that he [Raj] identifies as a form of ongoing, authentic interreligious dialogue, arising organically from lived experiences rather than abstracted theologies.” (p. 201) Though today many Hindus and Christians voice opposition to the mix, yet it would seem impossible, arrogant, and unwise to attempt to pour the new wine back into the old wineskins.

Sacred Matters is short collection of disparate papers, but with the help of a pithy introduction and the concluding essay they cohere remarkably well. The essays give interesting directions for further exploration of material cultural studies and to Hindu-Christian studies

as well. The work certainly does not eschew or replace textual studies of meaning, doctrine, ideology or theology, which are, somewhat ironically, still well represented in the nine papers. The study of materiality can contribute new sociological, anthropological, historical, and economic insights to the study of religion. The field might also be enriched, one feels, by thicker descriptive and phenomenological work on the lived experience of apprehending materiality as an epiphany of the divine. The volume has a useful index and 27 photographs, all black and white (would that they were color). *Sacred Matters* invites perusal, and adds materially to the field.

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Meeting of Opposites? Hindus and Christians in the West. Andrew Wingate. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015, x + 216 pp.

IN the preface to this helpful book, Wingate indicates that it is not an academic work, but intended rather “to encourage a wider interest in its subject across the churches, clergy, theological students and lay people, and Hindus who wish to go deeper into their engagement with Christians.” (7) For readers who still think that Christians live in the West while Hindus live far-off in India, the book will offer a useful corrective that brings home in vivid detail the crucial insight that the world religions today are here, wherever we live.

The book begins with a brave chapter entitled, “Christian-Hindu encounter in India: From the beginnings of Christianity in Kerala to the present day,” offering useful background for those unfamiliar with this history. But most of

the book dwells on contemporary particulars, what Wingate has noticed and noted down over many years of interfaith work and in the travels leading to this book. Three chapters respectively cover three Hindu devotional movements in the UK and USA (ISKCON, south Indian bhakti and, as Wingate calls them, Jesu bhakters). After a self-standing chapter on the Swaminarayan tradition, three additional chapters report on his visits to Leicester (UK), to several cities in the United States, and to Sweden. Throughout, Wingate is interested in temples and their communities, attitudes toward the practice of yoga, organizations such as the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society and ISKCON, and existing interfaith ventures on the local level.